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What began as a class project by three Stevenson High School students took on historical and national importance Friday.

The documentary crafted last year by Allison Nichols, Brittany Saltiel, Sara Siegel and their teacher, Barry Bradford, helped lead to the indictment of a former Ku Klux Klan leader in one of the most heinous crimes of the civil rights era.

A frail, stooped Edgar Ray Killen, now 79, responded loudly with "not guilty" three times Friday in Philadelphia, Miss., during his arraignment associated with the slayings of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. He was led off to jail pending another hearing Wednesday.

A Mississippi grand jury indicted Killen Thursday as the lead suspect in the case, which galvanized public opinion in 1964 and was dramatized in the 1988 movie "Mississippi Burning."

"Not many at this age can right a historical wrong, but here three teenage girls did that," Bradford said.

The girls' documentary, "We Are Not Afraid," examined the murders of civil rights workers Michael Schwerner, 24, Andrew Goodman, 20, and James Chaney, 21.

The three men were beaten and shot to death while participating in Freedom Summer 1964, an effort to register blacks in the South to vote and start educational programs. Their bodies were found 44 days later, buried in an earthen dam.

The Stevenson students, all juniors, have been working for the past 18 months to get the

40-year-old case reopened. They have pored over thousands of pages of court transcripts and interviewed former prosecutors and investigators, witnesses, the victims' family members and government officials for their 10-minute documentary.

The research even led to a phone interview with Killen, who was a prime suspect in the murders but never indicted on murder charges. Bradford conducted the interview in case something Killen said would force the girls to testify.

When Saltiel heard of the indictment, she said the news was too good to be true. She said their goal was to give the case attention, but because of the enormity of the task, they didn't expect much.

"It was pure shock it got this far," Saltiel said. "To say we have spent 1" years on it is nothing compared to the pain they have gone through."

In 1967, the Justice Department tried Killen and 18 other men, many also Klan members, on federal civil rights violations. Seven were convicted and sentenced to prison terms of three to 10 years.

Killen was freed after his trial ended in a hung jury.

Bradford said news of the indictment brought mixed feelings. While he was thrilled to know the right thing was done, he said it's sad that 41 years have passed since these families lost their loved ones.

"I knew in my heart and in my prayers we would come to this day," Bradford said. "I am so sorry for the families of the three victims that it took this long."

The student documentary won the state history fair contest last year and was chosen to represent Illinois at the National History Day finals in June.

The girls' push for justice also caught the attention of several law officials and lawmakers, including Republican U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park, who co-sponsored a House bill calling to reopen the case.

On Friday, Kirk congratulated the students and said they are "shining examples" of what young people can accomplish if they are determined. He said he plans to recognize the students' accomplishments on the House floor when Congress reconvenes.

This summer, a task force in Neshoba County, Miss., called for state and federal authorities to bring to trial those responsible for the murders. State and local newspapers also called for the case to be reopened.

The three students and Bradford worked with the Mississippi attorney general's office and U.S. Department of Justice on the case, they said.

Mississippi Attorney General Jim Hood and District Attorney Mark Duncan would not discuss what evidence they developed or exactly what role authorities believe Killen, now a part-time preacher, had in the killings.

Killen's name has been associated with the case from the beginning. And FBI records and witnesses from a 1960s federal trial in the case indicated that he organized the carloads of Klansmen who followed the civil rights workers out of town and waylaid them on the night of the killings.